The vows of the four great Bodhisattvas

Dear Sangha, today is the 15th January and we are in the New Hamlet. Today we will be studying the vows of the four great Bodhisattvas contained in the chanting of Monday evening.

Before we begin, I would like to make a few announcements. On the 4th of February we will be having an ordination ceremony for a number of new novice monks and nuns. That day will be a very nice day. In the early morning we will have the ordination ceremony…. I am now pregnant with these new babies and there is a lot of agitation in my womb because we are not yet sure how many babies I will give birth to. It seems that there are three, there may be four… it is uncertain right now.

On the same day, after lunch we will have the ceremony of Lamp Transmission (ordaining a new Dharma Teacher). There is only one nun (the Abbess) from the New Hamlet receiving the Lamp on that day so she will be able to give a long talk. I think that she will be giving a wonderful talk. She may tell us what led her to become a nun, what difficulties has she faced and how she has overcome them. She has been a nun for 24 or 25 years, since she was very young, and she has changed temples and practice centers a lot. Finally she has come to dwell with us here in our practice center, and so I am sure that she will have a lot to share with you.

Those that will be ordained as novices on that day will be able to wear their Sanghati robes for the first time in order to support their elder sister who will be sharing her insight with us that afternoon.

I also want to announce that the following people are apprentice Dharma Teachers (list)… they will receive the Lamp of Transmission this year or next year. I hope that they don't have to wait until the Year 2000! When I give birth to a child, I want them to grow up. If they don't grow up it is very sad for me. When I announce that you are going to be considered as an apprentice Dharma Teacher then it is a call for you to grow up, to be a grown up person. There are those among the list of names that are already ripe for the transmission but they can wait to receive the Lamp at the same time as the other brothers and sisters.

There are also those that may not be able to succeed in receiving the Lamp even after two years. It all depends on his or her practice and the support of the Sangha, because I am very aware of the ways in which I try my best to support my students in order for them to grow up. I am very generous with them. I don't ever want to lose the occasion to support my students… to do my utmost for them, but if they themselves don't try their very best it is difficult for me to help them.

We also need to take refuge in the Sangha eye…. more often than not, we are so sure that we are right. We think that we are very mindful, that we have deep insight but the Sangha eyes can always shine the light on some dark part of ourselves that we are not yet aware of. The shining of the Sangha eye is a practice to help you to improve yourself. It is a practice of transformation.

If you are so sure of yourself and your rightness then there is no need for you to come and practice here… you don't need to practice together with the Sangha. It is true that the Sangha eyes may only give a partial view as well, but when they shine on you must do your best in order to transform the negative seeds that have been pointed out to you.

In 1999 I will propose another list of apprentice Dharma Teachers but for now, I give you this list and I hope with all my heart that the candidates will succeed in becoming Dharma teachers this year or at the latest next year. It is possible however, that one of them may fail to receive the Lamp. I would like to emphasize stability. If you don't have stability, then your relationship with your brothers and sisters in the Dharma will not be harmonious and you cannot be happy. Therefore, the second element that is necessary for a Dharma Teacher is the capacity to be harmonious, with yourself first of all. When you have peace and harmony within yourself then you will see things in a new light with inclusiveness and tolerance. And in this way you become harmonious in your relationships with others. If you yourself are not harmonious, how is it possible for you to teach others to be peaceful and harmonious?

Not only must you be harmonious with those who are easy, but also with those who are most difficult. Try your very best to deeply understand and support him or her without suppressing yourself. It is the love and care that you show to others that proves that you are able to be a Dharma Teacher. We will know that we have the capacity to be a good Dharma Teacher when those that have come to Plum Village for a month, a week, a day or even a few hours all receive your love, your care and your deep listening. You are able to be a Dharma Teacher because you really care.

Now I would like explain the way in which we practice to look deeply into, and shine our awareness on one member of the Sangha. Sometimes in these meetings which can continue for two or three days, we may feel that all is lost. We must consider these Shining Light meetings to be a practice as it is part of our training to be able to look more deeply into a sister or brother, or a person who is a candidate for joining your Sangha as a new monk or nun.

Your own insight may be superficial, but being together with the sangha, after each person shares his or her wisdom, the collective insight becomes very great indeed. When we sit together as a large Sangha, the wisdom and insight of each person compliments the other. If your own deep looking is still largely superficial, it will be deepened by the insight of another member.

Occasionally as a result of the length of these meetings that can last for three hours, we may feel that we are losing a lot of time that could be better spent elsewhere. This is not true. These meetings are a practice of collective insight. When we look together and share our insight, it is not a vote by majority but by consensus. This means we all have to agree that whatever insight is shared with the person that we are shining light on is valid, even if we may see it from a different point of view.

To begin such a meeting, we will all come to sit together and the leader of the collective deep looking session will say, " I would like to invite you to look deeply into the attitude and behavior of X who has submitted an application to become a member of our Sangha, to become a novice monk or a novice nun. I request you to use all of your compassion and your insight in shining the light of awareness on X. Please be frank and open in sharing whether you feel that X's practice will improve day by day and would be a good monk/nun."

In Plum Village, we can also practice Buddhist meditation with a notebook and a pencil. We don't always need to close our eyes! Each of us will take a piece of paper and a pen and look deeply in order to see all of the good qualities and also the shortcomings of the person. We must always consider the good and lovely qualities in a person before we begin to think about their shortcomings... sometimes we can feel so shocked by some of the person's shortcomings that it may be difficult for us to see the beauty in them. We can also use this same spirit in our daily lives, at home or in the office… rather than always thinking of peoples' shortcomings we may like to try to think of their good qualities first.

The leader of the meeting will then allow about ten or twelve minutes for the community to write down their insight… first the good qualities, secondly the shortcomings and thirdly, advice that you think would clear the way for them, help them. For example we may share," I feel that you have these good qualities… and these shortcomings…. and so in light of this I would like to propose that …… We do not condemn, we may only propose. Every member of the Sangha will share their insight and their practice proposals like that. While the other members of the Sangha are sharing their insight, we will listen deeply and compare our own insight about the candidate. It may be that after hearing a few of the other members' sharings we feel that we must correct our insight, modify our points. We now have a more complete view of the person. In this way, we have the opportunity to correct and increase the depth of our insight. These are my thoughts. I hope that everyone will try to practice in this way.

So the meetings themselves will be divided into three parts. Firstly, the leader of the Sangha will announce and distribute a sheet of paper to each person and we each write down our insight. Secondly, everyone reads their points and corrects their insight. Thirdly, we unify our insight and come to an agreement.

For instance, one member of the Sangha says, "That person has this weakness…" In that case, you may not believe that the person has such a weakness and so you will raise your hand and share the reasons for your disagreement. You must make your point of view clear in order for people to understand your observation. If we feel that someone's points are not really correct, we can raise our hand and ask them to elaborate, make it clearer in order for us to understand better. It may be that they are correct, but unable to articulate it clearly.

After all of the community has clarified and explained their points, we ask the secretary of the meeting to write down the agreed points and with all of the Sangha's love and care will prepare a letter to the candidate to share the fruit of the meeting, of our collective insight. We do it with love and care because we do not want to become a judge. We really want them to become a good instrument of the Dharma, to become a happy person himself or herself, and then going and sharing the Dharma with others in order to bring happiness to them.

I am proposing these three steps because I know that these meetings can sometimes be very long. I think that if we follow this format then the meetings will be shorter. When we are practicing the second and third steps we may like to record the proceedings on a tape in order to be able to transmit the collective insight of the Sangha more accurately. This tape can be erased after we have formulated our report to the candidate. You won't need to keep this tape because this is the deepest insight of the Sangha… therefore nobody can complain. The whole Sangha has looked deeply and corrected their insight in order to complete each other.

(Bell)

Here is the list of the apprentice Dharma Teachers next year… (list)

These people, eleven in all will be apprentices Dharma teachers and they must try to practice properly. You must cooperate with the Dharma Teachers in making decisions and taking responsibility… you are also in charge. We also need the help and insight of the Sangha in order to be a better Dharma Teacher. If our stability becomes greater, then so will our communication with others. My wish, the wish of the Sangha is that you become a source of peace and happiness for all of those around you. When you are able to become a source of love, peace and understanding for others, then I will consider you as a success. However, at the end of the year, maybe four or five will receive the lamp of transmission. Next year, I will propose another list of apprentice Dharma Teachers.

With regard to the lay people I would like to propose (list). These people have stayed in the Village for a long time already. They know a lot about the teaching. We need them to be more solid in the practice. I have heard that in the Lower Hamlet practitioners approach Karl and Helga more than (name) even though she is already a Dharma Teacher… but she is lazy, she doesn't really come and try to listen to the difficulties of the practitioners. My wish is that they become more available in order to share the work with Karl and Helga in order to benefit Thay and the Sangha. Whatever you don't understand you can ask Thay.

Today we are studying the four great Bodhisattva vows in the chanting of Monday evening. We shine our awareness on the four great Bodhisattvas, but we also must bear in mind that every Bodhisattva is an awakened living being. You are also an awakened living being not less than they are. However you must train yourself in order to become more like them. When we invoke these qualities of the Bodhisattvas, we must also try to evoke the same quality within us. The method that we use in order to chant this section is that one person will read the invocation of one Bodhisattva on behalf of the whole Sangha, four Bodhisattvas in all. The quality of that reading should be very deep. The persons chosen to read on behalf of the Sangha must be solid, deep and be able to pronounce clearly every word and phrase. When these people read, we will all be able to feel the relaxed attitude and the concentration of this person. If we choose somebody to read who makes many mistakes or does it in a casual, superficial way there will be no benefit. Usually when you invite someone to read on behalf of the Sangha, you need to invite him or her to practice beforehand and if you see that they are able to read in a relaxed and concentrated way then you may invite them to read for the community.

But, if you just wait until the last moment and just pick up one person to read, there will be no benefit. For example, the gatha for evening sitting meditation begins "Stably seated at the foot of the Bodhi tree"… this is an invitation for the whole community to begin sitting meditation. You must choose one brother or sister who will try their very best and who has a good voice quality and stability. When you invite such a person, you will feel quite satisfied. If someone just raises his or her voice and everyone begins to giggle because it is so funny the way that he chants, then the whole period of sitting meditation will be destroyed. The freedom and stability of such a person is therefore very important.

Back to the Four Bodhisattvas. At the beginning you may believe that the four Bodhisattvas are outside of us. If you practice steadily, you will see that you are also that Bodhisattva because you also have all of those qualities. Some historians may not believe that there was ever a 'real' Avalokitesvara or Manjushri; they are not historical personalities. We cannot say that they were born in such and such a year and died in such and such a year… and so you may be embarrassed. If you come from the Mahayana tradition, you are so sure that these beings exist. But you must know that the name, Avalokitesvara (Regarded of the Cries of the Earth) is a symbol of deep listening and compassion. Compassion and deep listening truly exist everywhere, but where is everywhere? You must see that deep listening and compassion exist in at least one person. When you see such a person you know that that person is not the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara although they are manifesting the qualities of that Bodhisattva, and so you will feel that you will be able to do it also. I also have compassion and deep listening. Maybe my compassion and deep listening are not as strong as the other person's is, but I will train myself to increase this ability to love. Therefore, it is not important whether Avalokitesvara is an historical personage… if the qualities of love, compassion and deep listening exist so then must Avalokitesvara. We can also see that Avalokitesvara is a representation of some of the qualities of the Buddha also. Gautama Buddha is an historical person and he had these qualities… and Gautama Buddha said that everyone had these qualities like him. The qualities of the Buddha, love, understanding, compassion and deep listening are also in you.

The Bodhisattva Manjushri (Great Understanding) is another manifestation of the qualities of the Buddha. When you pay your respects to the qualities of wisdom and great understanding in the Buddha, you are paying respect to Manjushri also and vice versa. At the same time, you are also paying homage to those qualities in yourself. So although there are many disagreements between the Theravada and Mahayana traditions over whether these Bodhisattvas exist or not, we know that this is not so important. The important thing is that the qualities of great understanding and wisdom exist around us and within us. To a practitioner, it is not even important whether the Buddha was a historical person or not. You don't care. Some western people may debate some saying that Shakyamuni (Gautama) Buddha was historical or legendary, but you won't care. More importantly, he embodies compassion, great understanding, wisdom and love so he must be a very great personality. Without such a great personality how could he have built understanding wherever he goes?

The Bodhisattva Samantabhadra is the Bodhisattva of great action. Universal goodness, and goodness of action. Samantabhadra works hard and has the will to help.

Ksitigarbha (Earth Store Bodhisattva) who vowed to save all living beings in hell embodies truly great qualities of the Buddha. Some Christians are 'allergic' to the word, 'vow', but here we have no complex concerning that word… it is a very beautiful word. Ksitigarbha vowed that he would never abandon you. If you are caught in the condition of hell, even, he has vowed not to abandon you. Wherever there are people suffering the most, there also is Ksitigarbha… he is in jail; she is being tortured so I will

not abandon them. In this very world there are hells where people undergo the utmost suffering. We decide never to abandon them, rather we try our best to approach and to support them. Ksitigarbha is these qualities of not abandoning. He never abandons anyone even if that person is horribly difficult.

The key point is for us to be in touch with these four Bodhisattvas within ourselves by using the energy of mindfulness.

By reflecting on the qualities of these four Bodhisattvas we will see that mindfulness has four aspects.

The first aspect is compassion and loving-kindness. If Shakyamuni Buddha has no love then he is no longer a Buddha. In order to be a Buddha, a person must have a lot of love. S/he can love the lovable but also the unlovable.

The second aspect of mindfulness is great understanding. Without great understanding (maha Prajna) Gautama Buddha is no longer our Teacher. A Buddha must have great understanding and wisdom.

The third and fourth aspects are action and vows. When you are able to see clearly, you can only love. You cannot abandon the person that you love. They may be horrible, difficult people but you cannot abandon them because they are in hell and they need us.

When you love, you have to act. If you say that you have a lot of love but you don't do anything then that is not love that is merely lip service. The great vow of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is, "until the hells are empty I will not become a Buddha. I will remain until every sentient being is liberated.

To vow to go to the darkest places to help beings is perhaps the greatest of vows because sometimes these places are horrible. You will not abandon those who suffer. The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara illustrates the first aspect, love. Manjushri Bodhisattva represents great understanding. Samantabhadra is Great Action and Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva the Great Vow. In Mahayana temples usually the ears represent Avalokitesvara, Manjushri by the eyes and Samantabhadra by the hand.

For these reasons, we are able to say that these Bodhisattvas existed in the past, exist now and will exist also in the future. They don't need to be historical fact. Rather they are a reality, that ability to love, to understand, and act, save people and vow not to abandon those who suffer. These qualities exist in us we cannot deny it. They are truly in you, in those around you… in your teacher in the teacher of your teacher… so you may say that, " I don't care whether Avalokitesvara is a historical person… the truth is that the qualities of love, understanding and deep listening are within me and also you and that is more than enough."

(Bell)

One of the greatest problems that we face is the problem of faith. There are those who say that they worship God. If one day you discover that the concept that you have of God doesn't exist it may be very difficult for you because you have devoted 10 or 20 years of your life to it. In the history of human thought there have been those who state that, "If you worship God and He exists then you will go to Paradise. If you worship Him and it turns out later that He doesn't exist then you will not have lost anything. If God really exists and you don't worship Him then you can't go to paradise."

Actually, we know that the point is not whether it is true or untrue. As we said before, you may answer that (Avalokitesvara, Manjushri, Samantabhadra, Ksitigarbha, God or so on…) exist because I see their qualities in many people and in myself. We must be intelligent. If someone asks you whether you believe that God exists, you must ask with what criteria do they define God.

If you say that God is a symbol of love, that is okay and there is not doubt; you will not lose anything if you practice the presence of God because it is the presence of love and you can express love everywhere. If God is great understanding, you can practice in such a way that great understanding exists everywhere, so God exists. It is the same for Ksitigarbha. If you have Bodhicitta, the mind of love, you are able to enter and remain in those hells and illumine them

with a lot of light. Just the fact that you are there relieves a lot of suffering. Nowadays, in Vietnam, there are a lot of Ksitigarbha's there, they remain in the prison but they have a lot of inner freedom and joy and they can be very light and relieve a lot of suffering. If you are able to perceive the suffering around you, yet you don't feel anything and don't act then the Ksitigarbha in you is still small. Our practice is to make the Ksitigarbha, the Avalokitesvara in you grow. Even though we may not be called by the name Buddhist, we are still able to manifest these qualities of the Bodhisattvas within us… for example people like, Physicians without Frontiers or Amnesty International… these people may not have even heard about the Buddha or the Bodhisattvas yet they are able to actualize the teachings of love and compassion through their actions

The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. 'I vow to learn to listen deeply to others so I can help relieve the suffering of others.' Sometimes you know that he or she suffers, but you don't care, you have no chance, you do not want to share, to listen deeply. 'I vow to learn your ways to listen deeply, you are the heart that can know how to listen and to understand deeply. You are the one who can listen deeply and understand deeply. I will vow to sit quietly to listen to you.' The person who suffers a lot has the impression that nobody can understand him or her but if she or he can find one person who can sit quietly beside them and listen one hour to them, that is a great chance. So we have to train ourselves to be a deep listener and someone who understands deeply. So when you understand deeply you are a Manjushri. When you listen deeply, you are Avalokitesvara. We must learn to see in light of interconnectedness, interconnection. If you look deeper, you see that Avalokitesvara is Manjushri and so forth. There is no separation. Although in Buddhism we personify different aspects, we must see their interbeing nature .

Samantabhadra is someone who acts. If you don't understand deeply, if you don't love deeply, how can you act? When you act without understanding, without love, you can create more suffering than help. When you listen to somebody, your whole being must be 100 percent present. And being totally present like that, you will be concentrated. Having concentration means you get rid of the past, get rid of the future and focus 100 percent on one point, that is the heart of the suffering of others. We pull ourselves together, we try to be there 100 percent in order to listen others, listen with all your attentiveness, your great attention. I am sure that each of us has that ability but sometimes we don't use it! Our compassion exists but it is not big enough to help us to be there and to listen to him too long or to her too long. So we will not be lost in the past, we will not lose ours n elves in the future, but we look deeply. Usually we listen to our beloved one with half an ear only. We have to learn to listen to him or to her with 100 percent of ourselves. 'I vow to learn to listen without prejudice.' When you have an idea and someone presents another idea, you don't want to hear it. Whatever the other person says becomes distorted to favor your point of view. When we listen to somebody, we usually have an idea, a prejudice about that person, and then when people say something, we color the statements of the other people with our own prejudices. The vow of Avalokitesvara is you listen without any prejudice, any preconceived idea, you just empty yourself and be in the heart of others, in the difficulty of others, be in the fear of others in order to understand her difficulty. And the other part is I want to learn to listen without judging or reacting.

We have a habit energy to be a judge. Sometimes a judge for ourselves, sometimes a judge for others. When we hear something, we immediately form s judgement as to whether this is bad or good. Don't be a judge. Don't be a wall. You have to be space. Space can absorb everything, but if you are a judge you will have a wall and whatever people say will rebound back to them and they won't feel relieved at all but rather suffocated.

There is a Vietnamese musician who said that sometimes you must be space so that love can enter. If you are a wall, how can the All enter? You have to empty yourself of your preconceived ideas. You must become space. There is a Zen story concerning a philosopher who comes to visit a Zen master, and whilst the Zen master is preparing tea, the philosopher keeps talking endlessly about how much he knows. And so the Zen master prepares the tea and he pours the water into teapot until the teapot is overflowing. The water flows over the pot, the cup, and the table. The Philosopher shouts, "Stop! Stop! Don't you see that the

flood is everywhere?" And the Zen master smiles to that, "Your head is also a flood with all those thoughts exactly like the flood on my table. You want to come and learn with me, but you are so full of all your knowledge. Your knowledge floods everywhere, so how can you receive anything from me?"

And so the Vietnamese musician reminds us to be space so that love can enter, understanding can enter. We must learn not to be a judge. We already judge others a lot and others have also judged us. We suffer a lot. Now we learn not to be a judge, not to judge people. The aim of listening deeply is understanding. When you hear something correct, you understand; and when you hear something that shocks your ear, don't reject it. Try to look deeper. Maybe you can learn something about your own mind as well as the mind of others. 'I vow to listen deeply in order to understand what people are saying. And also that left unsaid.' Sometimes there are things that are too difficult for people to express. Some people come to our practice, and at the beginning they pretend they have nothing, they are quite fine; but if they stay with you about five days, seven days, they start to share with you some things, but what they say is not yet the deeper reality, only the superficial portion because they are afraid that they will be judged by you. So you have to listen deeply, even if they repeat themselves. Try to understand what is left unsaid and if you are skillful, then you see the very critical point and you will ask the right question for that person to release.

There's a couple who came and they told only the small difficulties around but not the real difficulties. Usually people are afraid to lose their prestige, they don't dare to tell the real problem but they only tell the secondary problem. Only when they arrive, when they stay, and they get attention and care from somebody several times, maybe a dharma teacher they dare to tell.

Sometimes a visitor can stay only a few days, and if she cannot see a dharma teacher, and if she is not lucky to see somebody who is competent, you can be that Bodhisattva of deep listening too, you listen with one hundred percent of your being in order to understand what has been said and what has been left unsaid. When you listen like that, then suddenly you will understand the point that that person didn't say and if you know how to ask the right question then she will be able to release their inner pain.

One day, myself and a teenager were pulling some weeds, then the teenager spoke to me saying, "There is something that I see that is very beautiful but my mother says is not beautiful. How can you explain that?" And I looked deeply into his situation and I said, "Would I be correct in thinking that there is a young Swiss girl that you think is beautiful but your mother doesn't?" And he was very shocked, "How did you know that?" He only told me that there is something beautiful that his mother says is not beautiful, and he didn't dare to tell the truth. When I looked deeply, I knew it must mean he fell in love with some beautiful girl and his mother said she is not beautiful. And for him I have the magical power of reading minds, but when you listen deeply like that you understand right away. The people who listen with only half an ear cannot understand deeply. After that he revealed everything to me, and I had to explain about things, because his mother was not yet skillful enough.. Beauty is very profound, don't be attracted by just the smile or just the hair, the eyes, but you must see the depth of the beauty, but the mother did not yet know how to explain like that. The mother felt that she is not beautiful, and that's all. I knew that I needed only to listen , and even if I cannot do anything yet, I could relieve the suffering from him You must listen deeply in order to relieve the suffering of others.

Secondly, you can at least communicate with that person because in our society technology is very advanced, we have e-mail, fax, telephone, in half a second you can send a lot of news to the other side of the planet; but the communication between two persons under the same roof, parents and children, mother and daughter, sister and brother, the communication between people living in the family is so difficult because we are alienated by so many outside things. You can spend five hours on your computer without looking deeply to the person next to you who loves and cares for you. And so to listen deeply is a way to reestablish the communication between yourself and the persons around you.

[Bell]

When we read these Bodhisattva vows, we have to read relaxingly, and very profoundly so that your every word can touch the hearts of those who listen to you. We read the Bodhisattva vows in order to remind ourselves that we need to be trained in that direction. 'I invoke your name, Manjushri. I vow to follow your path in order to stop and look deeply into the heart of things, the heart of people'. These days we run very fast, like those who are pursued by ghosts, even if we are drinking tea we are still running. Running to the west, running to the east, running ten thousand miles from the reality in front of us. In order to see deeply, to understand deeply, you have to stop. You sit in front of your daughter, but you think of the events of the day, your daughter fades away in front of your eyes. You cannot see her suffering, her difficulty, and her fear. So we have to learn to stop. Without stopping, how can you see more deeply? So Samatha is stopping, and looking deeply is Vipasyana Bodhisattva Manjushri is the one who practices Vipasyana meditation, looking deeply. He or she knows how to stop, look deeply, so he practices Samatha and Vipasyana. He or she knows how to stop in order to see deep into the heart of things and in the heart of living beings around him/her. The heart here is all the states of mind of others and of yourself. That is the object of your observation, so the practice in Plum Village when you sit, when you walk, when you stand, when you eat, you have to learn to stop. Even when you practice walking meditation, you must learn to stop. Sometimes we sit in a silent meal, but we are still running. Sitting, eating mindfully, and learning to stop. There are a lot of people who are sitting and eating, but they are running in their minds. You are eating, but in your mind you are thinking of the east, the west, here and there, we let our mind run life after life. Why don't we live our lives deeply and fully? So when you do walking meditation you learn to stop your mind in order to have the capacity to look deeply. That is the quality of Manjushri. I will train myself to look at everything with all my sincerity and my wholeheartedness. I will learn to look with eyes without prejudice. The Avalokitesvara, you look without prejudice. You listen without prejudice. I vow to train myself to look without judging.

In order to understand the suffering of a Palestinian, you must really look in the way of a Palestinian. And a Palestinian must learn to understand deeply an Israeli in order to understand all his suffering, her fear. And after looking deeply in that way, you see that each side suffers anger, fear and jealousy so if we continue to punish each other, we'll not go far. It is better that we take our hands reciprocally in order to find a common solution beneficial for both sides.

We live in the sangha. We notice that two members of the sangha do not look at each other so you can come and help the sister to be close to other sister, to practice Samatha and Vipasyana. So you listen without prejudice, you look without prejudice. I learn to look deeply in order to see all the roots of all beings.

The first Noble Truth is suffering. When you look deeply into the first truth, you see the second truth, that is the impermanence element. There is the non-self element in that, and then you can understand. I will learn your way to use the sword of understanding in order to cut all the affliction. You can only cut affliction or sorrow by the sword of understanding. It means when you are angry, you are sorrowful because of that person. For you, he is bad, she is bad. With great understanding, you understand her suffering, his suffering, and his fear. And when you understand like that, your sorrow is gone because you understand him. You understand his difficulty. You are no longer sorrowful because you know that such a person must behave in such a way, and I am only the victim of his suffering, that's all. So when you understand, it's easy. That is the sword of understanding that cuts the sorrow. So I wish that you can use that sword of understanding. It means that you shine your awareness and understand a lot.

In my poem of transmission to Dharma Teacher (Thich Phap Dang), I said that the sword I gave to you, use every day. The sword of understanding to cut ignorance you must use every day. The poem I gave to Brother Phap Dang is the teaching I rediscovered on the old mountain. It means that teaching I rediscovered on the old mountain, Vulture Peak where the Buddha gave a lot of teaching. We are here, but we also live in the ultimate dimension. We see that right here is the mountain. We don't need to go to India to see it. So when somebody receives the lamp of transmission, does it means that he is Enlightened? No, you must train yourself more. It is a tool

for you to train yourself more. So in my poem to give to Phap Dang, I said that after ten years of training, he will make shining the

lamp of wisdom of the family everywhere. The art and the sword I give to you are for you to use every day, not to put in your cupboard. Then one day, the blossoming of wisdom everywhere.

The Bodhisattva Manjushri uses the sword of understanding to cut through all the bonds of suffering. When you suffer a lot it is because you don't use the sword of understanding to understand and to cut.

Now we go to Samantabhadra. 'I invoke your name, Samantabhadra. I decide to bring the eyes and the heart to enter into life'. The eyes of whom? The eyes of Manjushri. And the heart of whom? The heart of Avalokitesvara. So you see Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara, and Manjushri are one. It means three qualities of one person. And the three qualities complete each other. So when you go into life in order to save the world or to help, you need to have the eyes of Manjushri and the heart of Avalokitesvara. 'I vow to bring joy to one person in the morning and relieve the suffering of another person in the evening'. So the practice is not the question of speaking a lot but to do two things: to relieve the suffering of one person and to bring joy to another person. What you say is not enough. You have to really bring joy to one person in the morning and relieve the suffering of another person in the afternoon. This you can do. If you are a little Bodhisattva, you at least have to bring joy to one person in the morning and relieve the suffering of another person. If you are a bigger Bodhisattva, you bring more joy to many persons and relieve the suffering of many others. You walk in the community. I only need you to walk mindfully, to be joyful, to be happy, to be kind, to be humble, and you already give a lot of joy to people.

The joy of others is my own joy. That is the wisdom of the Buddha, of inter-being, of inter-connection. Happiness is not an individual matter. If you are joyful, the other is also joyful, if others suffer less, you also suffer less. The happiness of others is my own happiness. And I vow to bring a lot of joy in my spiritual path. In my path of service, I know that every word, every look, every act and every smile can bring a lot of happiness to people. I know that if I diligently practice, I myself will become a source of peace and joy to the person I love and to all living beings. That is the Samantabhadra vow.

Your spiritual path should be a very joyful path. I have reminded you several times, if you practice with a lot of pain, why should you enter into a practice center? People suffer a lot outside. When you enter into practice center, you must be joyful. You must have joy in the morning, joy in the afternoon and joy in the evening. When a brother or sister asks you if you are joyful, you must say with joy, "YES!" And then you have to tell people what kind of real joy you have, and if you don't have that joy, you must look more deeply in order to discover that joy. It does exist within you. Sometimes one negative incident or piece of news obsesses you and then it invades your whole mind and you forget many joyful elements in yourself. You are so completely overwhelmed by that negative incident. Meanwhile, you have a dozen other joyful things, but you have completely forgotten about them.

The practice is to observe our unlucky situation— yes, something happened—but you still can be in touch with many other joyful things in order not to be drowned in your difficulties. If you train yourself, you will see that you are in fact very rich because with every word you can bring happiness to people, every look can bring happiness to people, every small act can bring happiness to people, and even your smile can bring happiness to people. We know that if we train ourselves diligently we can become an infinite source of peace and joy. I can become a source of joy and peace for a lot of people, for those I love and also those around me. We only need to live with awareness to touch all these positive qualities in ourselves, to touch the Manjushri quality in you, the Avalokitesvara qualities in you, the Samantabhadra in you, and you will have a lot of joy to offer to people.

Now the fourth vow. 'I invoke your name, Ksitigarbha. I will learn to follow your way. I wish to be present everywhere where darkness, suffering, despair, torture, oppression exist. I decide, I am determined to come to bring light to these areas where there is darkness, where there is despair, where there is oppression; and I will bring light, I will bring hope, I will bring faith, I will bring emancipation. I vow that I will never abandon those who are caught in a despairing situation. I vow to make a link with those who have no way of escaping.'

A lot of us have been in countries where people are deprived of human rights that live in oppression. In some countries, people are so desperate that we feel that we cannot communicate the reality of their suffering with the outside world. Sometimes we even have to pour gasoline on our own body in order to burn ourselves, so people in the outside world will know that people are suffering terribly here.

In the world, there are a number of those who are unfairly jailed, they are suffering a lot and they are desperate. If we don't do anything for them, we fail in our Vow. Nowadays, there are a number of people who want to be Ksitigarbha and try to relieve the suffering of people in desperate situations. We live in a society where we have plenty of material luxuries, we are jealous for this little thing, but we don't realize that there are people who are in jail unfairly and they just want to be a person living with dignity. They are thrown in jail, and they suffer a lot. To learn the way of Ksitigarbha is to reach your hand into these most desperate situations, to those who are deprived of human rights, who are put in jail in many totalitarian countries. '

I vow to make communication with those who have no way to escape, those who live in dark jails, who have no way to call for justice, to call for human dignity. I know that hell exists everywhere on earth, and I vow not to contribute to making more hells in this world. I vow to dismantle many hells.'

We must realize that there are those who have never heard the name of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva yet they manifest these qualities every day. In big cities like Chicago, New York, Manila, Washington D.C., there are a lot of hells also. In Paris there is hell, too. So we have to discover these hells and to dismantle them in order to help people and relieve their suffering.

Sometimes we may have the notion that we didn't contribute to the creation of that hell. In fact, we are constantly creating this hell by our forgetfulness, jealousy and craving for money. We do not see that hell exists around us, so we continue to live our lives in a way that is harmful to other beings. We are creating hell around us constantly. We must make it clear that we do not want to make more hells. By our way of living mindfully, we will not act in a harmful way that would create hell around us.

When you act or speak unmindfully, you cause a lot of suffering around you. People suffer because of your unmindfulness.

'I vow to learn the way to be more stable, more solid, and profound like the earth'. The Sanskrit name Ksitigarbha means "the Bodhisattva of the earth, Earth Store."(in Chinese Ti Tsang Wang Pu Sa) . I vow to develop the stability and solidity of the earth, in order to become faithful and without discrimination, like the earth. The earth never discriminates between perfume and urine. The earth absorbs everything and transforms it into flowers. So I want to learn the quality of the earth, very solid, very profound and stable, very rich, no discrimination, in order to be the support for all those who need my support. I vow to become all of these qualities of the earth so that I will be a great support for many people.

When you pour garbage on the earth and then you pour milk and then in three months the garbage will become flowers and the milk will become flowers too. The earth has the quality to release and to accept, the quality of accepting everything and releasing every negative thing. Can we be the support of somebody else if we don't have the solidity of the earth? If you see within yourself that you are not yet solid enough, you must train yourself to become more solid.

There is one man who has the name Nicholas. He has sent us a letter from jail, from hell. From a jail in the United States. This letter was sent from hell to one Ksitigarbha. Some of our friends in the United States have developed a ministry of buying a number of the books of Thay from Parallax Press and distributing them within the prisons. They purchase the books cheaply, sometimes they may have a damaged cover or something similar so they are not able to be distributed commercially and send them into hell. And some of the prisoners in jail, after reading these books, have transformed a lot.

Nicholas's is one of many thousands of letters we receive here. Nicholas is on death row. He has been waiting to be executed for seventeen years. He had the opportunity to read Living Buddha, Living Christ in jail. On the 28th of December, 1997, he wrote:

‘Dear Thay, I don’t know if this letter will arrive in your hands or not, but I wish that somebody who lives at the same address as you can open this letter and read my words so that I feel relieved. I found your address in the back of the Book ‘Living Buddha, Living Christ’ that was offered to me. . I have been on death row for 17 years already. My life has had a lot of suffering during this time, a lot of despair. But in me there is a will to transcend all these psychological and emotional wounds. These wounds are with me and grow in jail. There are days where I struggle very hard against my anger, and there are moments when I feel I cannot transcend my anger and hate. I feel that I am crushed by my hate. But strangely, I learn to live simply from that moment of learning, the hatred toward those who have been very hard to me, cruel to me, my only vow is to survive without becoming crazy because of this hate. I hope to survive without hate, without hatred toward those who put me in jail, who have tortured me. I don’t know how I can do that. I don’t know how I can transcend the moment when I feel that I will go crazy or I think that I am going insane. How can I survive and transcend this difficult moment? I never think that I am better than or higher than other people are. I am quite satisfied with who I am. My only dream is that one day I will be released and somebody will come and see me and that person will say, "That person spent 20 years in jail, but he’s still normal." That is my only wish.

I am an ordinary person. I am very grateful that in jail, after 17 years, I can still keep my sanity. I am not crazy yet. And with that gratitude, I can treasure what happens in my life. When I see the sunset, I feel a lot of happiness. I sit behind my jail door. I can enjoy the sunset through the little window in my cell. In the last cell that I had, for 12 years, I was only able to look at a brick wall.. In my new jail, there is a window where I can see the city with a lot of trees. And the first time I came in touch with trees, I was so moved that I cried. When I read your book, it was the first time I learned to dwell peacefully in the present moment. I understood that teaching right away. In the past, I hated all organized religions. I felt that any religion always tried to eliminate those who didn’t follow them. So that is the reason why I only followed my inner search. I have only started to learn about Buddhism, but I can see already in the way of searching for something beautiful, I can learn to live deeply in the present moment, mindfully in the present moment, my material life. In this situation, I have a lot of difficulties, but I learn to treasure the short moments of awareness, living in jail. During these moments of awareness the fear and despair in me can not master me, and I tune in to the humanness in me, and I can behave like a Buddhist. I believe that if I continue, I will find transformation.

I know that if one day I am executed in a violent way, I will be able to accept that. I wish that from this garbage, I can transform into a flower, I can find peace in me. During my search for peace, I have learned to accept myself as well as those around me. My only dream is when I am released, people come to me and say, "How come after 20 years in jail, he is still a normal person?" I write this letter to you hoping that these simple words can share with you the humanness in me. I wrote to you not in the name of one person in death row, but as a person who has been sent here to jail in order to grow. To learn and to grow in a very difficult situation and in a condition where you have no hope for the future. The main idea of this letter is to tell you, Thay, that the human nature exists in me and to tell you that a death row prisoner can find peace and joy in hell. Please take good care of yourself. Love, Nicholas.

After reading this letter, I asked Sister Thuc Nghiem to send to him the book about walking meditation, and I wrote to him and asked him to practice walking meditation in his own cell, and if he can, also request permission to go outside in the prison compound to do walking meditation , and if he can help other prisoners to practice walking meditation and if they feel some peace, he also can do a lot of work for prisoners. It is very encouraging for us here in Plum Village to know that you are there practicing being in the present moment and giving a chance for the best in you to manifest. Your spiritual and blood ancestors have transmitted these jewels to you. True freedom is freedom from afflictions such as despair, anger, and hate. There are so many in the world who are not free and who suffer tremendously. They do not have a space within.

Here is another letter from jail and from hell. (…) This is from a Vietnamese prisoner. He is only in touch with Thay through the American book of Thay in jail:

" My name is Hun. I admire you a lot, and I am living in this center jail. When I read…your book, I learned a lot and I started to love human beings, living beings. Since I left my parents, I entered into the criminal way, and materialism attracted me, and so I forgot the spiritual way home. In jail, I read Being Peace and The Joyful Path , and they helped me a lot. Especially on page 14, I can feel that I have been touched with my own roots and my own ancestors. I thank you deeply for opening my eyes so that I can understand my father. I wrote a letter of reconciliation to my father. My father is an alcoholic, and he beat my mother and all of us, and so when I grew up, I did not love my father. Thanks to your book, I can see all the suffering that my father had when he was a young child. Because that page talks about meditating on your father as a five year old child. So thanks to that, I can reconcile with my father and I wrote a loving letter to him.

I want to thank you. Thanks to that, our relationship will become very good. Your book has helped a lot of prisoners around me. I want to thank you for giving us a lot of these books for us to practice. [He said] In the name of those who will be arrested who will be able to read this book and who will be transformed.[signed Hun.]

So you don’t need to go far. You just have to look deeply in order to be in touch with this hell. And your arm can reach very far. A sangha in the UK also sent a lot of Plum Village newsletters in Vietnamese and English to prisoners of Vietnamese and other origins. And also books. Parallax Press has been generous enough to give books that have been sent back and forth, so maybe their covers are a little bit damaged, but the text itself is perfectly fine. So they send them to the jail.

There is another prisoner who wrote me a letter that went like this: "One day, I was following my breath and standing on my staircase. I saw other prisoners running, full of anger and hate. I saw that they were like a bomb about to explode. I felt a lot of compassion for them. I wished that they could know how to breathe like me and how to enjoy the present moment like me and would not suffer and be full of hatred like that."

There is another man who wrote a book it is called, "Finding Freedom" (available from Parallax Press). The author of this book is in jail on death row. He took the Five Wonderful Mindfulness Trainings with a Tibetan monk. His name is Jarvis Jay Masters. In one chapter of the book he reports how he took the Five Wonderful Precepts, how he is in touch with Buddhism. One day, the nearby prisoner was fighting, beating up his wall and shouting, " Why, why?" Jarvis was breathing and smiling. And the prisoner who was beating his wall said, "You stupid guy. You have a lot of tobacco, why don’t you give me some, half of your tobacco?" Jarvis was already practicing Buddhism, so he did not smoke. And so the other man beat the wall, he said, "Who are you?" He said, "I am Buddhist. I do not smoke. And if you ask for some cigarettes or some tobacco, you have to be kind and ask politely. You cannot behave in such a way. Maybe the guy on the other side has some tobacco but not me. If you behave in such a way even if I had tobacco, I wouldn’t give it to you. You have to become very kind. So sit quietly. I’ll try to find a way to help you."

Jarvis had already abandoned using tobacco. But he still had some tobacco. In the past, he used to smoke tobacco a lot, but when he became a Buddhist, he quit. Meanwhile, he had been storing up his weekly allowance in order to share with other prisoners as a way of spreading the Dharma! So he took a little bit—that much, just a little—and then he wrapped it and he passed it to the other cell. He wrapped the tobacco in one photocopied page of my book Being Peace! It was the first page of Being Peace. So with the tobacco he had left, he divided it into 20 parts. He had received a photocopy of Being Peace from a friend. After he had read it, he loved and appreciated it so much that his friend outside of jail gave him a real copy of Being Peace. He still had the other photocopy of the book. So he used them to wrap the tobacco when he gave some tobacco to the other side. Three days after the man had received the first page he gave another piece of tobacco with the second page of Being Peace. Then the man would ask him just for the pages. So he still had the book for himself, but he gave away the whole photocopied version of Being Peace page by page. The man on the other side after he finished reading the book, he also practiced breathing mindfully and dwelling in the present moment. Then the cell would become very calm. Jarvis received some love from that prisoner with the tobacco.

The other prisoner was released soon after because he was not on death row. And when the other one was released, he stopped to thank Jarvis and both of them recited the same sentence from the book. When he said farewell, suddenly the prisoner

inside uttered this sentence, and the one outside uttered the same sentence at exactly the same time: Both of them recited this at the same time in front of the guard. If you are peaceful, if you are calm, if you are happy, if you can smile, then the people in your family will smile and in your society will smile, and they can enjoy the peace radiating from you.

So we must see that Ksitigarbha is not merely a legendary personality. Ksitigarbha is in you, in me, and in many others everywhere. We only need to train ourselves to become a Ksitigarbha, then our hand will be able to reach into the places of the most terrible suffering, darkness and oppression.

[Bell]

END.